

I oppose loosening the rules designed to promote and protect diversity of media ownership. These rules were adopted to ensure that the public would receive a diverse range of viewpoints from the media, and not simply the opinions of a handful of media conglomerates.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is undertaking a review of nearly all of its media ownership rules, a proceeding that will have profound effects on our nation's media landscape. Our democracy depends upon a diverse and robust media that ensures the free flow of information from a wide array sources and viewpoints. But recent years have been characterized by rapid consolidation in the media industry, a trend that has left us with FEWER corporations controlling a larger percentage of the information upon which we base important political and personal decisions. The current FCC proceeding seems skewed towards further scaling back regulations that are intended to promote media diversity and protect civic, minority and noncommercial voices.

As the country reels from some of the biggest business scandals in U.S. history, the FCC is getting ready to give big media a big gift-- the rollback of some of the last regulatory checks on media consolidation.

As part of its 2002 Biennial Review, the FCC is "reconsidering" many of the rules that have preserved at least some vestige of media diversity.

People across the country, from grassroots activists to members of Congress, are raising their voices to stop the FCC's rush to open the floodgates to another wave of media mergers. Among the public interest protections under threat:

- Newspaper/Broadcast Cross-Ownership Rule. Prevents the owners of a broadcast station from owning daily newspapers in the same market, and vice versa.

- National Broadcast Ownership Cap. Is meant to prevent one company from owning broadcast stations that reach more than 35 percent of U.S. households. The courts have asked the FCC to provide a fuller justification of the rule, but the FCC seems ready to give it up.

- Local Radio Ownership Rule. Caps the number of radio stations a company can own in a single listening area to eight or less, depending on the area's size.

- Duopoly Rule. Limits a company to owning two broadcast TV stations in a given market.

- Dual Network Rule. Bars the major TV networks-- ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC-- from merging with each other.

If these rules are scrapped, big media's gain will be the public's loss. For example, without the newspaper/broadcast cross-ownership ban, many communities may find their only local daily paper has been bought by one of the TV networks. It's not hard to imagine the drop in news quality if newspapers are absorbed by the broadcast TV industry.

Chain ownership of newspapers, television and radio stations would likely increase dramatically, with all-too-familiar consequences: layoffs as formerly independent news divisions merge, less original content and even further cuts in local affairs coverage.

Commercial broadcasting has gone through stunning negative changes in recent years, as deregulation and consolidation have shifted the balance of power to a small handful of companies with interests and investments spread across the

media landscape. We now live in a world dominated by profit-driven media conglomerates more interested in delivering viewers to advertisers than in serving the needs of the public.

Dissenting political viewpoints are routinely marginalized in national mainstream media, and the interests and perspectives of women, people of color, labor, and lesbians, gays and bisexuals are consistently underrepresented. Across the country, broadcast public affairs programs that address local concerns are almost non-existent; many communities can't even expect any coverage of their local elections on TV.

Independent, critical and genuinely representative media are crucial to a healthy democracy; without them, citizens lose the means to control and participate in the public debate that sets the nation's political agenda. Sadly, this is already happening: In the absence of an effective regulatory agency, corporate control of the media is damaging our democracy.

This country's airwaves belong to the American people, and the FCC is supposed to manage them in the public interest. Unfortunately, the current FCC leadership seems hostile to this very concept. Asked to explain his understanding of the public interest, Chairman Powell once replied that he had "no idea" what it meant.

That's why it's so important that the FCC put the brakes on its hasty review and encourage a real debate-- one that engages the public and public advocacy groups, not just industry "experts."

We urge the FCC and Congress to take a stand for democracy, to preserve and strengthen the rules that limit media consolidation, and to promote public access to media. It's time for a real debate.